

Incidental Learning in Storytelling

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Abstract

This article analyses trainee teachers' experiences of incidental learning using storytelling in the English as a Second Language (ESOL) classroom in the Further Education and Skills sector. It comments on the reflections of trainee ESOL teachers using story activities in their practice and it explores their experiences of incidental learning within language teaching.

The research focuses on the responses, evaluations and perceptions of trainee teachers on the effectiveness of storytelling as a pedagogic tool to enhance language and literacy skills development and explores the impact of incidental learning on trainee teachers' professional development.

The findings indicate that trainees experienced incidental learning whilst implementing storytelling in a wide range of contexts with various groups of learners from Entry Level 1 (beginners) to Level 2 (upper intermediate). Storytelling as a pedagogical tool was used in various forms, such as unplanned impromptu uses when demonstrating a grammatical or lexical point. The trainee teachers' reflective accounts of incidental learning demonstrated a positive impact on their professional progress, which is mainly reflected in the components of attitudinal and intellectual change with some evidence of behavioural change too.

The key findings of the study indicate that storytelling provides creative opportunities for teachers to develop their practice incidentally. It highlights the importance of unplanned and spontaneous anecdotal stories in engaging ESOL learners in language practice and suggests that stories can be used as an effective pedagogic tool in teaching and learning.

Keywords

Incidental learning; Storytelling; Communities of Practice; Teacher Education; Further Education and Skills Sector; Trainee Teacher ESOL teachers.

Introduction

Throughout life, individual learning is shaped by the experiences that the person engages in. However, when something unexpected occurs within the context of these learning

experiences which challenges existing knowledge, then incidental learning takes place. It has been argued that incidental learning happens when an individual is occupied within a learning experience and when something unexpected or unplanned happens. This is also defined as disjuncture (Marsick and Watkins, 1992). It is therefore a by-product of another activity, whether that is a formal or informal learning experience (Hunter, 2010; Kerka, 2000).

This paper explores if the use of storytelling can result in incidental learning for trainee teachers and how storytelling can be used to engage learners. The personal nature of sharing anecdotal stories can result in incidental learning which unexpectedly shapes trainee teachers' professional development (Brasher, et al, 2012; Polly, 2007). Trainee teachers can be highly receptive to learning experiences as they have a desire to learn and which draws attention to the importance of incidental learning occurring within their practice.

One of the most important elements for a trainee teacher which shapes the sort of teacher they will become, is the journey that they experience throughout the programme (Jephcote, Salisbury, 2009). The placement experience provides valuable opportunities for incidental learning to take place and this can lead to the growth of their knowledge and skills in their pedagogical practice. According to Rytivarra and Kershner (2012) professional learning is a deep learning experience which results in transformations to practice, rather than superficial acquisition of knowledge and skills. It is through the adoption of practice that results in changes within the individual.

A definition of incidental learning

McGeouch, 1942 (as cited in Marsick and Watkins, 1992), first defined incidental learning as learning which is unplanned and occurs within a formal learning environment, but without formal instruction or specific materials. This describes the characteristics of incidental learning, but is limited to formal learning. It has since been extended to include all types of learning experience, focussing on the unexpected element of the learning that occurs (Marsick and Watkins, 1990).

Incidental learning is often discussed alongside informal learning and has even been described as a subcategory or component of informal learning (Gilley et al, 2001; Polly, 2007; Hunter, 2014). However, due its spontaneous nature, it can take place within any type of learning experience, unexpectedly as part of another activity. It is by nature unplanned and therefore an individual and personal learning experience.

Marsick and Watkins (1992) suggest that incidental learning is more prevalent within an unpredictable and dynamic environment such as the workplace, where disjuncture is more likely to happen. However, teaching and learning environments within which teachers operate offer rich opportunities for incidental learning. Not only is the learning environment

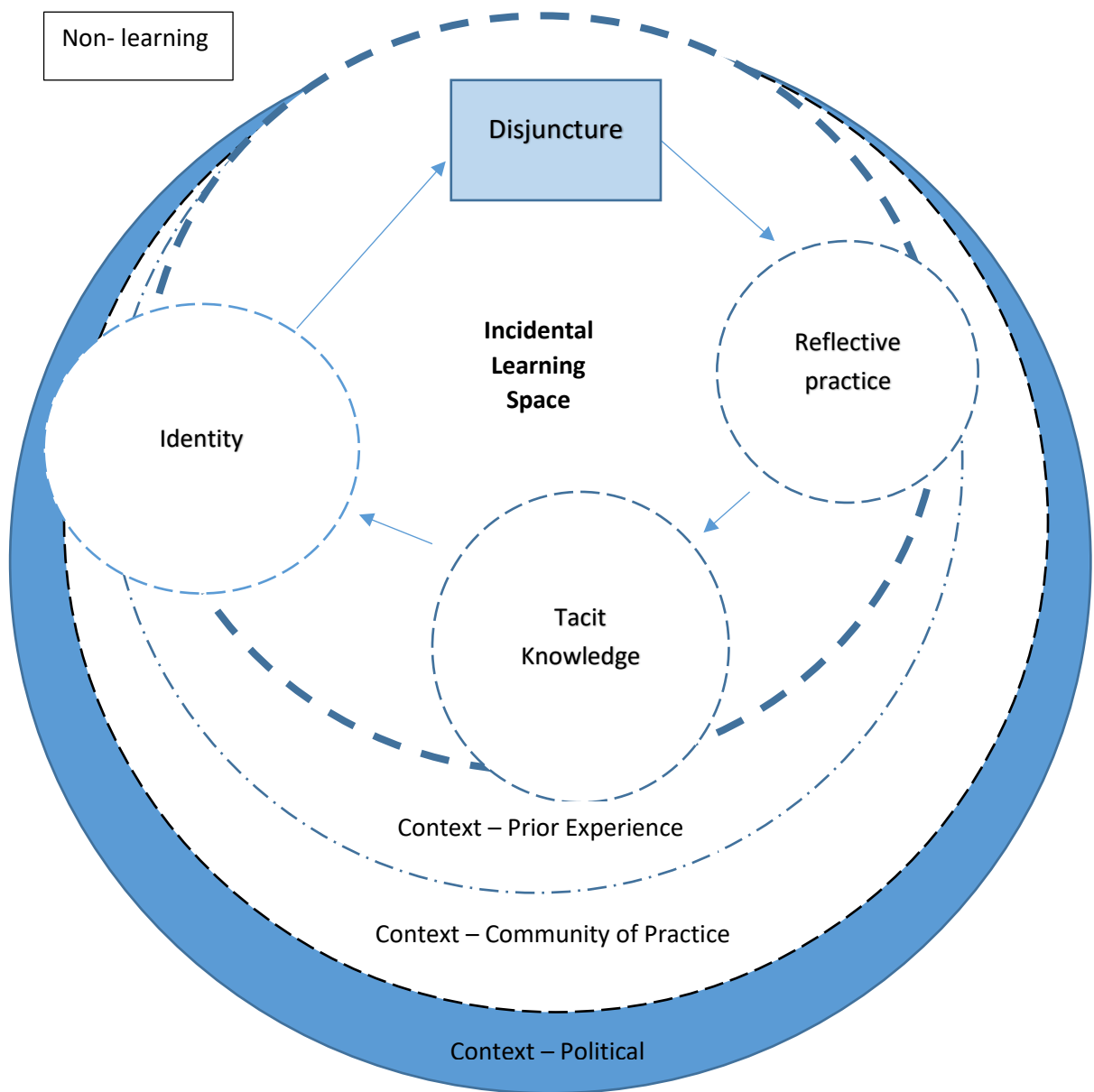
unpredictable, but the dynamics within the group can fluctuate and this creates the sort of conditions where incidental learning takes place. This makes it an important type of learning that should be valued as part of a trainee teachers' development of pedagogical skills.

The theoretical framework for incidental learning to happen in a meaningful way

The framework for incidental learning (Figure 1) includes a central learning sphere where incidental learning occurs. The trigger for incidental learning is some form of *Disjuncture*. This is when an individual is forced to find an alternative approach to a situation because of something unexpected happening (Jarvis, 2010; Marsick and Watkins, 2001; Polly, 2007). This unplanned trigger is often a by-product of another experience or activity and is subject to interpretation by the individual. This is in relation to prior knowledge.

Alongside this, *critical reflection* on the experience enables meaning to be formed. Context also plays a pivotal role, determining how an individual interprets the experience and consequently, the actions which follow. The existing knowledge and prior experience that an individual has will impact on how every factor is engaged with.

Figure 1: Theoretical framework for incidental learning



Methodology

The study focused on the post lesson evaluations of a small group of trainee ESOL teachers teaching in a variety of contrasting settings in the Further Education (FE) sector. Contexts of teaching included: FE colleges; Community teaching; Adult Education Services and English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

The participating group of teachers were asked to deliver a storytelling activity of their choice as part of their teaching practice; after the lesson they were asked to reflect on the success of this activity and to post their thoughts onto a Moodle forum. Nineteen trainee teachers took part; out of these 12 were pre-service and new to teaching (novice teachers) and 7 were in-service teachers (in post). There were 24 'discussions' or posts on Moodle (see diagram 1 below).

Diagram 1 Screen Shot of Moodle



The trainees' post lesson reflections were posted on Moodle and were analysed as part of qualitative data. The importance of reflection is emphasised strongly by teacher trainers as an essential part of teacher development (Farrell, 2011), as it encourages them to examine and evaluate their classroom practice and pedagogic development. Coding was used to identify recurring and prevalent themes in the teachers' responses on the Moodle forums. Coding can be defined as the naming of units of data (Newby 2010) which emerge, tagged with codes or themes.

With reference to language teaching methodology, the ESOL teachers were encouraged to use a range of approaches to implement their storytelling activities to gain a richer collection of data to analyse; it was expected they would adopt an “Engage, Study and Activate” (ESA) approach to learning (Harmer 2007) by encouraging learners to draw on their own prior knowledge and experiences or “stories”. It was anticipated that teachers might then use the stories elicited from learners to teach aspects of grammar or vocabulary, following on with learners then using this new knowledge to formulate a piece of work. Storytelling activities could be provided, or trainees could choose to make one of their own.

The key question in this research study aimed to explore how storytelling activities can shape teachers’ professional development and incidental learning. The research study was based on a humanistic philosophy, which argues that individuals and their stories should be at the heart of education, that learners’ views, beliefs and experiences will help us as teachers to better understand, change and manage their language learning. The study endeavoured to take an inductive approach to analysis, examining what emerges from the data collected.

Ethical framework

An ethical framework is usually provided by “a knowledgeable professional body” (Megginson et al, 2007: 34). In this research study this was endorsed by the university where the researchers work. The trainees were given an information sheet detailing the aims and objectives of the research study and they were asked to sign a participant information sheet to seek permission to carry out research and ensuring confidentiality. It was made very clear to all trainee trainers contributing to the research study that participation was entirely voluntary and that it was not an officially assessed part of their course; all trainees who took part in the study did so out of choice.

Valid and rigorous qualitative research data should reflect diversity of race, age, gender and culture. As the data analysis for this investigation is based upon qualitative judgments, the research was conducted with a mixture of ‘pre- service’ (new to teaching) and ‘in service’ (in a teaching post) trainees to offer richer data and to allow comparisons. Trainee teachers were chosen based on their willingness to participate, the rationale being that willing volunteers will engage with the process more fully

Berman (cited by Mishra Tarc 2013: 392) points out that students’ personal disclosure of experiences during language classes can be a problematic, opening up a host of ethical and personal conflicts for the student and the teacher. With reference to this study the ESOL teachers were asked to consider this in terms of ethical practice during storytelling activities, being aware of sensitive subject areas for the learners such as: war and political conflict, different ethnic and religious beliefs or loss of family and friends during ethnic

cleansing. However, Berman suggests that rather than avoiding 'emotional' issues, that these be used to inspire students to write with meaning, for example, by encouraging learners to use their personal experiences in 'language experience' story writing.

This research study followed a qualitative approach to collecting data, taking a humanistic philosophical position. Storytelling can offer insights into people's worlds as they are grounded in narrative, reflecting how people see themselves and feel about themselves. It was therefore the aim of the study to use qualitative data to seek knowledge on interaction and feelings. Qualitative data is defined by William and Brown (2009) as a process which seeks to measure the value of something; this study examined the effectiveness of using storytelling in incidental learning, exploring the values of trainee teachers' experiences and their interpretation of classroom 'events'.

Analysis of teachers' responses

Significantly all the trainee teachers decided to devise their own storytelling activity either selecting and adapting a readymade resource or making one of their own. This suggests that offering a choice encouraged trainees to develop their creativity and imagination, enabling them to demonstrate the ability to make their own resources, showing autonomy and metacognitive skills.

*'...my mentor said **I could be as creative as I liked**...I could choose what to teach...I thought this was a good opportunity to use storytelling...as sometimes I am constrained by a set scheme of work...'*

Trainees' responses indicated story activities were a valuable and enjoyable vehicle to use in the classroom, demonstrating pleasure in the use of storytelling.

*'It was **great** working with stories...'*

*'All the students seemed to **really enjoy** hearing each other's stories...'*

*'The learners **really enjoyed and engaged** with this activity.'*

Stories were used as a creative source or 'incidental springboard for inspiration' and diagram 2 below indicates trainees' inspiration for storytelling tasks.

Diagram 2 Trainees' Inspirations for Storytelling



Analysis of trainees' reflections indicated clear evidence of both planned and impromptu creative experimentation with storytelling activities in lessons, using a variety of inspiration for tasks and resources such as: ice breakers; fictional stories; fairy stories; folk tales; literature; story games and use of video stories.

'This activity is not my own invention, it is adapted from a game I've been playing since I was a child, but I have found it words very well as a quick starter, or to target word class, or certain vocabulary'.

Interestingly, trainees discovered that true stories and 'human interest' stories were popular with students.

'Students seemed to like the story because it's was gory, unsolved and real. Learners also liked it because it happened in this country.'

'...problems and miniature adventures I have the students can relate to...I also find it somewhat easy to talk about life experiences as these are real happenings'

It is important to note that trainees used personal anecdotal stories to model and exemplify language, acting as a story role model. Trainees also suggested they unexpectedly discovered anecdotal stories allowed them to present a more human side for learners to identify and bond with.

'...the teacher should introduce herself and tell them something interesting about herself too. This makes the teacher more human and likeable'.

Trainees perceived anecdotal conversation and exchanging of oral narratives of personal experiences as a highly social act, thus encouraging not only *explicit* but *implicit* collaborative learning strategies. Significantly, personal anecdotes from both teacher and learners which were used naturally in class, were found to be a very successful pedagogic tool.

'I incorporated my own anecdote using a personal experience...'

'The use of personal anecdotes made the class lively as they all wanted to contribute...'

Most trainees expressed confidence and belief in the effectiveness of their story activities in their teaching practice, trainees' accounts revealing that what began as incidental storytelling in the form of personal anecdotes, became a routine classroom practice in various forms due to the observed positive impact on the atmosphere in class and learners' language proficiency.

'I would begin each session with an anecdotal story telling activity...'

Responses from ESOL trainee teachers indicated that personal stories are valid and useful platforms to use in language teaching for a variety of purposes such as: encouraging class bonding thus promoting a positive learning atmosphere conducive to a multi-lingual classroom; stimulating learner engagement and motivation; promoting interaction and collaboration; and building situational language context to make a pedagogic teaching point.

Findings

Accounts of trainees' incidental learning was particularly significant in the following areas:

1) Trainees discovered that telling personal anecdotal stories can act as a 'follow me' model to encourage students to tell their own anecdotes.

'I had imparted information and this encouraged the learners to speak about their own lives with me and each other...'

2) Trainees unexpectedly discovered the value of utilising their own life stories as short anecdotes, to spontaneously illustrate a language point and/or to function as prompts for learners' own stories. Trainees' responses revealed an impromptu usage of storytelling particularly as a pedagogic tool to aid learners struggling unexpectedly with a specific grammar point, or to give an example of the language in context for clarification.

'When learners are struggling with a particular grammar point it is often necessary for it to be put into context for clarification. To do so I often draw upon my own life experiences, not just to help clarify the grammar point with which they are struggling but also to help them engage with their teacher...'

Trainees' accounts exemplify an impromptu usage of stories on occasions when they had been using storytelling strategies in their practice without realising it; especially when they needed to clarify a language point without having it purposefully planned it for that particular lesson, or spontaneously when introducing a topic area.

'I recently used storytelling in an ESOL class without realising I was doing it!'

An analysis of the trainees' reflective accounts enabled the mapping of trainee teachers' responses to anecdotal storytelling as a continuum of incidental learning practices, demonstrating that storytelling can be effective in impromptu; 'one off' and anecdotal uses of storytelling; routine classroom practice stories; storytelling for ice breakers, warmers and engager activities and collaborative storytelling activities. However, it is significant to note that certain uses were seen to overlap and run into each other, such as personal anecdotal stories as warmers and ice breakers

The study also supports the theory that when teachers and learners are engaged in and focused on anecdotal communicative story tasks, it results in impromptu language practice with language learning taking care of itself (Harmer, 2007).

'It engages the imagination of the learners and they particularly enjoyed making their own stories up and hearing the variations in the stories from other learners.'

The accounts demonstrate the trainee teachers' individual approaches to the introduction and usage of storytelling activities in their teaching practice which, in most cases, led to some levels of change in their professional development due to incidental learning, mostly demonstrating an attitudinal change in the form of positive acceptance of anecdotal stories in their future practice.

'It went really well much better than I anticipated and is something that I will definitely use again'.

'I must say I was a little unsure about how the group would take to writing about themselves in a far more personal way than is required for a C.V. However, the results revealed that they found writing about themselves and their lives in a mini autobiography an enjoyable task'.

This study suggests that uses of storytelling led to developmental changes in the professional practice of the trainee teachers who, having experienced a positive response from their learners, changed their attitudes to storytelling, perceiving them as inspirational and a tool they would use again within their teaching methods. It was clear to see how bringing storytelling into trainee teachers' training enhanced their pedagogic perspective on their teaching; enriching their teaching practice and changing their beliefs on effective teaching.

'I will introduce more forms of storytelling tasks in future activities...'

'This exercise gave me ideas for future lessons...'

Significantly, trainees' reflections revealed examples of incidental learning within their teaching, indicating that the storytelling activities had enlarged their professional understanding of their practice, leading to more conscious planning of using storytelling.

'With hindsight, I would fully plan the lesson around a fictional story...'

Reflections from trainees

Reflective practice is an important tool in practice-based professional learning contexts such as teacher education, where incidental learning plays a big role in how trainees learn from their own professional experiences. This is in contrast to more formal forms of learning or knowledge transfer. Analysis of the data indicated that trainees experienced clear examples of 'disjuncture' in the form of unexpected classroom situations. These incidental learning experiences occurred when trainees learnt from their own professional experiences, rather than from a formal learning or knowledge transfer. Analysis indicates that trainees were reflecting 'on action' and identifying how to improve their practice (Schon, 1983).

'If it had been a longer session I would have used more stops for variations in activities...'

'The activity would have been delivered more smoothly if I had done more to raise schema and tune the learners into the necessary vocabulary at the beginning of the session. I would do this in future as well as suggesting an optional opening sentence for the beginning of both stories...'

A clear example of 'disjuncture' can be seen in the post below from a trainee teacher whose storytelling activity received an unanticipated negative reaction from his ESOL learners, as they were not engaged in the story subject matter.

'In a previous lesson a student lost interest due to a subject in a story that was not apparent in his native country...Even though I struggled to inspire him into the topic, it was a learning aspect for me to think about the contexts of my stories in future lessons...'

The choice of subject matter and story context topic featured as an important factor in analysis of the data. Loehr (2012) describes how having a negative connotation within a story can lead the learners being negative consciously or subconsciously.

It was evident from posts from the pre-service 'novice' teachers that they were still exploring their practice. Trainees' comments would suggest that they were still learning incidentally from the use of storytelling activities in some instances, as some were using

personal anecdotal storytelling spontaneously without planning but, subsequently recognised the value of such activities.

'...I feel that starting the lesson with a short story about my own home promoted a feeling of inclusion and relaxation. The story I told was impromptu and anecdotal...'

Jefferson (1978) points out that modelling of language by teachers often takes place through impromptu 'incidental anecdotal story chat'. It is evident from some trainees' comments that sometimes they had not planned to use personal stories, or indeed are not always aware that they are using personal anecdotes as pedagogic tools but do use them regularly.

'...It is something that I have used in each lesson that I have prepared and taught. I cannot say that to do so has been a conscious decision on every occasion, but it has been present throughout.'

The use of personal anecdotes by teachers was a prominent theme reflected in trainees' posts on Moodle, they demonstrated how personal stories from the teacher not only engage learners but help the ESOL teacher become more human and bond with their group. Trainees' posts indicate that the use of anecdotal stories invited open dialogue amongst the learners and the teacher, with the teacher acting as a conduit for the ESOL learner, to tell her/his story or narrative.

The role of incidental learning was evident in the development of pedagogic practice. Analysis of reflections showed clear evidence of trainees' experiencing unexpected situations or 'disjuncture' in their teaching, both positive and negative. Analysis revealed examples of incidental learning within their specialist subject of language teaching and articulated awareness of how storytelling has improved their practice. Analysis of trainees' reflections indicates that the storytelling activities have enlarged their professional understanding of their practice, leading to more conscious planning of using storytelling, identifying how it will be used in the future.

Conclusion

This aim of this study was to analyse the reflections of trainee teachers' experiences of using storytelling as part of their teaching practice in ESOL classroom and to examine any examples of incidental learning. Findings were based on observations of ESOL teachers experimenting with story activities in their language classes and the impact on the teachers' professional development.

The findings indicate that trainees used storytelling successfully as a pedagogical tool in unplanned impromptu uses, when engaging learners in a topic area or when demonstrating a grammatical or lexical point. The trainee teachers' reflective accounts demonstrated a

mostly positive impact on the implementation of impromptu storytelling resulting in incidental learning in trainees' professional development, which is mainly reflected in the components of attitudinal and intellectual change with some evidence of behavioural change too.

The key findings of the study indicate that storytelling provides opportunities for teachers to engage in incidental learning and highlights the importance of using anecdotal storytelling in engaging learners. It suggests that with careful planning and sensitive consideration, stories can be used as an effective pedagogic tool in teaching and learning.

This paper argues that incidental learning can occur through the exchange of anecdotal storytelling within a classroom setting and that trainee teachers can use storytelling techniques as an opportunity to critically reflect on their practice. Ultimately this can provide an embodied approach as it is born from personal experience.

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